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Benjamin Franklin

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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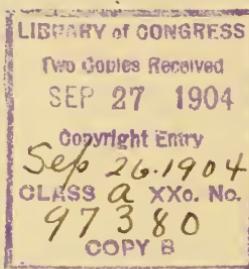
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FRANKLIN, BENJAMIN.

FRANKLIN, BENJAMIN, an American printer, philosopher and statesman, born in Milk Street, Boston, Mass., Jan. 6 (old style), Jan. 17 (new style), 1706. He was the youngest son of the youngest son of many generations of Franklins who came of old English stock well known in the shire of Northampton. The name of Franklin appears rather to be of a French than of an English origin. It is certain that the name of Franklin, or Franquelin, is very common in Picardy, especially in the district of Vimeu and Ponthieu. It is very probable that one of Franklin's ancestors was an inhabitant of this region, and went over to England with the fleet of Jean de Biencourt, or that which was fitted out by the nobility of this province. There was at Abbeville, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a family of the name of Francklin, and John and Thomas Franquelin, woolen drapers, lived there in 1521.

Franklin's father, Josiah, and the grandfather and great-grandfather before him appear to have been blacksmiths, although according to Dr. Franklin's own account of his family, whose pedigree he looked into with great diligence while he was in England, it appears that they were all well born, or gentlemen in the best sense of the word; yet the blacksmith succession was most religiously continued in the family down to the days of Benjamin's father, who in his later life in Boston became a candle and tallow merchant. Josiah and his favorite brother Benjamin had lived on thirty acres of land in Northampton, where they conducted the smithy along with the cultivation of the good, old English soil. They were a pious race, the Franklins, and in the days of Charles II. Josiah and his brother Benjamin, are said to have abandoned the Church of England and espoused the cause of the Dissenters. It was on this account that led Josiah to leave England about the year 1682 and take up his abode in Boston, bringing with him his wife and three children. There were four other children by this wife, and upon her death Josiah married Abiah

Folger, a daughter of Peter Folger, who had settled in Watertown in 1635. Folger was a missionary among the Indians and later a Baptist preacher. Ten children were born to Josiah by his second wife, the fifteenth and youngest son being Benjamin, who was destined to become a leading figure in early American history.

Uncle Benjamin, elder brother of Josiah, was of a literary turn, and early in life collected two quarto volumes of poems, written in shorthand of his own inventing. Being a man of great piety, and fond of listening to the best preachers, whose sermons he always took down, he collected in the course of his life, eight volumes of sermons in folio, besides nearly thirty in quarto and octavo, and all in shorthand. In his seventy-third year, still rugged and strong, he left England and came over to America to see his young brother. On his arrival in Boston he was warmly received by Josiah, who pressed him to spend the remainder of his days in his family. To this proposition the old gentleman readily consented; and the more so as he was then a widower. He had the honor to give his name, and to stand godfather to little Benjamin, for whom, on account of his vivacity and fondness for learning, he conceived an extraordinary affection. It is certain that the bent of Uncle Benjamin's mind had much to do with the shaping of Dr. Franklin's career as journalist and philosopher.

Franklin undoubtedly derived his piety and learning from his father's family; his physical traits from his mother. His clear, sound, common sense and homely philosophy, the most distinguishing qualities of mind which he possessed, he got from his father. The elder Franklin was a wise though not indulgent parent, and the son in his *Autobiography* draws a portrait of him in which he tells us that he was of medium size and finely formed—his complexion fair and ruddy—black, intelligent eyes—and an air uncommonly graceful and spirited. In respect of mind he was a man of the purest piety and morals, and consequently cheerful and amiable in a high degree. He possessed a considerable taste for the fine arts, particularly drawing and music; and having a voice remarkably sonorous and sweet, whenever he sang a hymn accompanied with his violin, which he usually did at the close of his day's labors, it was delightful to hear him. He possessed also an extraordinary sagacity in things relating both to public and private life, insomuch that not only individuals were constantly consulting him about their affairs, and calling him in as an arbiter in their disputes; but even the leading men of Boston would often come and ask his advice in their most important concerns, as well of the town

as of the Old South Church where young Benjamin was baptized.

— Almost all of the distinguishing features of Franklin's character in life may be traced to his childhood. He was in his earliest days shrewd and artful, industrious and persevering, and of habits most economical. Childhood. The stories of his recommending his father to say grace over a whole barrel of beef at once; and of his disgust with a favorite whistle, the moment he found he had paid too dear for it, are well known. When at school Franklin distinguished himself among his playfellows by his strength and address, and he was generally the leader in all their schemes. Their great delight was fishing for minnows; and as their constant trampling had made the edge of the pond a quagmire, Franklin's active mind suggested the idea of building a little wharf for them to stand upon. Unluckily a heap of stones was collected, at no great distance, for building a new house; and one evening Franklin proposed to his companions to make free with them after the workmen were gone home. The project was approved, and executed with great industry; but the next morning the stones were missed, and inquiry was made, and the consequence was—a complaint against the boys. Franklin pleaded in excuse the utility of the work; but his father wisely took the opportunity of inculcating the excellent maxim, that what is not honest cannot be useful.

At the age of eight Benjamin was sent to the Boston Grammar School, his father intending him for the church. His Uncle Benjamin, too, greatly approved the idea of making a preacher of him; and by way of encouragement, promised to him all his volumes of sermons, written in his own shorthand. At the age of ten little Benjamin, not over fond of the career marked out for him, longed for the sea and the life of a sailor. Josiah had already lost one son by his running away to sea, and, fearful of losing another, as a sort of compromise, Benjamin was set at "dipping wicks and pouring grease," in his father's chandlery. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin writes of his boyhood period:

"I continued in my father's business for two years, that is, till I was twelve years old; and my brother John, who was bred to that business, having left my father, married, and set up for himself in Rhode Island, there was all appearance that I was destined to supply his place and become a tallow chandler. But my dislike to the trade continuing, my father was under apprehension that if he did not find one for me more agreeable I would break away * * * to his great vexation. He therefore sometimes took me to walk with him, and see joiners, bricklayers, turners, braziers, etc., at their work that

he might observe my inclination and endeavor to fix it on some trade or other. It has ever since been a pleasure to me to see good workmen handle their tools; and it has been useful to me, having learned so much by it as to be able to do little jobs myself in my house when a workman could not readily be got, and to construct little machines for my experiments, while the intention of making the experiment was fresh and warm in my mind. My father at last fixed upon the cutler's trade, and my Uncle Benjamin's son, Samuel, who was bred to that business in London, being about that time established in Boston, I was sent to be with him some time on liking. But his expectations of a fee with me displeasing my father, I was taken home again."

Franklin from his earliest school days had been fond of books and reading. His first collection was of John Bunyan's works in separate little volumes, and he was enraptured with *Pilgrim's Progress*. These books he sold to enable him to purchase Burton's *Historical Collections*, which, he writes in his *Autobiography*, were "small chapbooks, and cheap, forty or fifty in all." It was at this time that he read *Plutarch's Lives*, De Foe's *An Essay on Projects*, and Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good*. These volumes had much influence on the future events of his life.

"This bookish inclination," says his *Autobiography*, "at length determined my father to make me a printer, though he had already one son (James) of that profession. A printer's In 1717 my brother James returned from England apprentice. with a press and letters, to set up his business in Boston. I liked it much better than that of my father, but still had a hankering for the sea. To prevent the apprehended effect of such an inclination, my father was impatient to have me bound to my brother. I stood out some time but at last was persuaded and signed the indentures when I was yet but twelve years old. I was to serve as an apprentice till I was twenty-one years of age, only I was to be allowed journeyman's wages during the last year. In a little time, I made great proficiency in the business and became a useful hand to my brother. I now had access to better books. An acquaintance with the apprentices of booksellers enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one, which I was careful to return soon and clean. Often I sat up in my room reading the greatest part of the night, when the book was borrowed in the evening and to be returned early in the morning, lest it should be missed or wanted."

After much reading, young Franklin, while serving his apprenticeship, was ambitious to put his own thoughts on paper and first turned to versification. One of his poems was called *The Lighthouse Tragedy*, and contained an account of the shipwreck of Captain Worthilake with his two daugh-

ters ; the other was a sailor's song on the taking of the famous Teach, or Blackbeard, the pirate. "They were wretched stuff," he afterward wrote, "in street ballad style; and when they were printed my brother sent me about the street to sell them. The first sold prodigiously, the event being recent, and having made a great noise. This success flattered my vanity ; but my father discouraged me by criticising my performances, and telling me verse-makers were generally beggars. Thus I escaped being a poet, and probably a very bad one." He then turned to prose, and by the aid of his father and an odd volume of the *Spectator*, succeeded in correcting his faults of composition and made rapid progress. Three years after he was apprenticed he obtained a book on vegetable diet, and, with some liking for the perverse, became a vegetarian. In this way he saved part of the expense of his board, and got a little money for books. From reading Xenophon's *Memorable Things of Socrates*, he took up the Socrates method of disputation which helped to crystallize his style.

In 1720 James Franklin, printer, established *The New England Courant*, the third newspaper in the colonies, and Benjamin, unbeknown to his brother, wrote occasional pieces for it which he secretly placed under the door of the office. These were accepted and printed without their authorship being discovered. Encouraged by his success, he wrote on, and sent to the press, in the same way, several other pieces, which were equally approved, keeping the secret till his slender stock of information was pretty completely exhausted, when he came out with the real author. His brother, on this discovery, began to entertain a little more respect for him, but still looked on and treated him as a common apprentice. Ben, on the other hand, thought that, as a brother, he had a right to greater indulgence. This difference in opinion rose to disputes, which were often brought before their father, who generally gave way to Benjamin. James could not bear these awards of his father in favor of a younger brother, but would fly into a passion and treat him with abuse, even to blows. Ben took this tyranical behavior of his brother in extremely ill part ; and he somewhere says that it imprinted on his mind that deep-rooted aversion to arbitrary power, which he never lost, and which rendered him through life such a firm and unconquerable enemy of oppression. His apprenticeship became insupportable and finally in October, 1723, he secretly set sail on a sloop for New York. Finding no employment in New York he pushed on to Perth Amboy by boat and from thence walked to Philadelphia, arriving there very tired and very

hungry with only a Dutch dollar and a shilling in his pocket. He found two printers in Philadelphia, Bradford and Keimer, and with the latter he secured employment. In a few months through Keimer he became acquainted with Sir William Keith, governor of the province, who after a time urged the young printer to set up in business for himself. Keith sent him to Boston with a letter to the elder Franklin asking financial assistance. There was a pronounced development of character in the youth at this time, and the story is told, how in his journey to Boston he stopped at a village inn, the landlord of which was impertinent and inquisitive. Franklin had scarcely set himself down to supper when his landlord began to torment him with questions. He, well knowing the disposition of these people, and knowing that answering one question, would only pave the way for twenty more, determined to stop the landlord at once by requesting to see his wife, children and servants, in short, the whole of his household. When they were summoned, Franklin, with an arch solemnity, said : " My good friends, I sent for you here to give an account of myself ; my name is Benjamin Franklin ; I am a printer, of nineteen years of age ; reside at Philadelphia, and am now going to Boston. I sent for you all, that if you wish for any further particulars you may ask, and I will inform you ; which done, I hope that you will permit me to eat my supper in peace."

Removal
to Phila-
delphia.

In Boston he met with no encouragement from his father, and was sent back to Philadelphia empty-handed. He reported his failure to Governor Keith, who with much pomp and bluster asked him to make an inventory of the things needed in a printing shop and finally urged him to go to England for the purpose of purchasing the stock at the Governor's expense. The promised letters of introduction and credit were not forthcoming before the ship sailed from Philadelphia, but being assured by Sir William that they would be sent, Franklin sailed, only to find that Keith was not a man of his word. For eighteen months the young printer struggled in London. While there he was persuaded by a merchant, a worthy Quaker, named Denham, to return to Philadelphia and enter his employ as a clerk, and on July 23rd, 1726, they embarked for America. Franklin was now approaching his majority and thus far had failed at his trade. He had worked five years in Boston, three in Philadelphia and nearly two years in London, and now in his twenty-first year, after working without ceasing and practicing rigid economy, he was as indigent as when he began.

The relation between Denham and young Franklin proved of short duration, for the Quaker merchant died in the February following their arrival from England, and Franklin re-entered the employ of Keimer, resuming his trade of the types. A few months later he set up in business for himself with one Meredith, and in October, 1729, they issued the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a newspaper purchased from Keimer. In this paper Franklin originated the modern system of business advertising that has since grown to such enormous proportions. The following Marriage year, on September 1, the young publisher was married to Miss Deborah Reed, whom he had met during his first year in Philadelphia. He was but twenty-four years of age, and had now reached the turning point in his career. We have sketched rather fully his early life inasmuch as the vicissitudes and struggles of boyhood and youth had important bearing on his character and purpose. With his marriage his public career of usefulness began. He was a self-educated man, of breadth of mind, originality, sound judgment and remarkable common-sense. At once he began to practice thrift, correct living and tranquillity of mind. He was soon to become public-spirited, influential and successful. In 1731 he founded a subscription library and by the advent of 1732 began to acquire some wealth through his own industry and frugality and that of his wife who folded and stitched pamphlets and tended shop. He considered himself fortunate in having such a wife and often quoted the old English proverb : "He that would thrive, must first ask his wife."

"Industry was the keynote of his life as boy, as youth and man, and in his memoirs, he is particularly anxious to inculcate the duties of industry in order that his posterity may know the use of a virtue, to which he was so largely indebted. Throughout the whole of his long life, his precept was strengthened by an example of the most remarkable industry, of which he furnishes many instances. When a printer, he was engaged in a work of forty sheets, on which he worked exceedingly hard, for the price was low. 'I composed,' says he, 'a sheet a day; and Meredith worked it off at press; it was often eleven at night, and sometimes later, before I had finished my distribution for the next day's work; for the little jobs sent in by our other friends, now and then, put us back. But so determined was I to continue doing a sheet a day of the folio, that one night when having imposed my forms, and I thought my day's work over, one of them by accident was broken, and two pages were reduced to pie (a printer's term for the type getting mixed and in confusion), I

immediately distributed and composed it over again before I went to bed ; and this industry, visible to our neighbors, began to give us character and credit ; particularly, I was told that mention was being made of the new printing office, at the Merchants' Every-night club.'

It was in 1732 that Franklin first published his *Almanac* under the imprint of Richard Saunders, and it was continued by him as *Poor Richard's Almanac* for twenty-five years. It was the comic almanac of the time and proved a great success. It was one of the most influential publications in the world, being reprinted in Great Britain, and translated into French and distributed among the poor. Charles Fox used to say, that had Franklin written nothing else, his *Poor Richard's Almanac* was alone sufficient to immortalize him. His maxims, famous now as then throughout the world, were largely upon temperance, industry, and frugality. His advice to a young tradesman is well-worth repeating here:

"Remember that time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day, by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle one-half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away five shillings besides.

"Remember that credit is money. If a man lets his money be in my hands, after it is due, he gives me the interest, or so much as I can make of it, during that time. This amounts to a considerable sum where a man has good and large credit, and makes good use of it.

"Remember that money is of a very breeding prolific nature. Money begets money ; and its offspring can beget more ; and so on. Five shillings turned is six. Turned again it is seven and threepence ; and so on, till it becomes hundreds and thousands of pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning ; so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He, who kills a breeding sow, destroys all her offspring, to the thousandth generation. He who murders a crown, destroys all that it might have produced ; even scores of pounds.

"Remember that six pounds a year is but a groat a day. For this little sum, which may be daily wasted either in time or expense, unperceived, a man of credit may, on his own security, have the constant possession and use of an hundred pounds. So much in stock, briskly turned by an industrious man, produces great advantages.

"Remember this saying 'The good paymaster is lord of another man's purse !' He who is known to pay punctually and exactly to the time he promises, may, at any time, and on any occasion, raise all the money his friends can spare. This is sometimes of great use. After industry and frugality, nothing contributes more to the raising of a young man in the world, than punctuality and justice in all his dealings. Therefore

never keep borrowed money an hour beyond the time you promised, lest a disappointment shut up your friend's purse for ever."

Franklin's career from this time was one of rapid progression and subsequent public recognition. In 1733 he began the study of languages, had some mastery of French and acquired a reading knowledge of Italian, Spanish, and Latin. In ~~1736~~ he was elected Clerk of the General Assembly and the next year was appointed Deputy Postmaster-General. He was instrumental in organizing a regular police patrol in Philadelphia, and formed the Union Fire Company, the first of its kind in America. He invented the Franklin stove, or Pennsylvania fireplace. In 1744 he founded the American Philosophical Society and later agitated the matter of an Academy, which eventually resulted in the University of Pennsylvania. Meanwhile his mind ran to scientific themes and he became a student of nature. He was a careful observer of ants and made interesting discoveries about them. He also made the discovery that the northeast storms moved backward, that is, from southwest to northeast. In the field of electrical research he made numerous and valuable discoveries. He found the power of metallic points to draw off electrical matter, he discovered a positive and a negative state of electricity, he explained on electrical principles the phenomena of the famous Leyden vial, he explained the phenomena of the aurora borealis, and of thunder gusts, he showed the striking resemblance in many respects between electricity and lightning and made his famous experiments with the lightning and an ordinary kite on the commons back of Philadelphia.

About the year 1753, Franklin began to play an important part in the conduct of colonial affairs. He visited New England upon various political missions, while there receiving degrees from Yale and Harvard in recognition of his electrical discoveries. The following year he was sent as commissioner from Pennsylvania to the Congress in Albany, where he brought forth the first coherent scheme ever propounded for securing a permanent Federal union of the thirteen colonies. But public opinion was not yet ripe for the adoption of the bold and comprehensive ideas which it contained, and in consequence, it was rejected. In 1755, by the steadfast personal exertions of Franklin, General Braddock was enabled to obtain horses, wagons, and provisions for his expedition. For the payment of these Franklin pledged his own property, and by the failure of the expedition he found

himself heavily in debt. Meanwhile the troubles between the colonies and the mother country became acute, and in 1757 Franklin was sent over to England as agent for Pennsylvania, to plead the cause of the Assembly before the privy council. The duties of the position kept him five years in England. His discoveries and writings had won him a European reputation, and in 1762 he received the degree of LL.D. from the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh. He returned to Philadelphia now a prominent figure in colonial politics, and two years later, in 1764, he was again sent to England as the agent for Pennsylvania, and was instructed to make every effort to prevent the passage of the Stamp Act. But when the obnoxious measure was passed in 1765, Franklin counselled submission. "In this case, however, the wisdom of this wisest of Americans proved inferior to the 'collective wisdom' of his fellow-countrymen." The Stamp Act was soon repealed, and Franklin's testimony, in which was evinced his strong sense and varied knowledge, contributed greatly to the desired result. When the demand was made on Massachusetts for the payment of the tea destroyed in Boston Harbor, Franklin went so far as to advise Massachusetts to make the payment, fearing that war would result if it were refused. Samuel Adams, on hearing of this, said: "Franklin may be a good philosopher, but he is a bungling politician." In this instance Franklin showed himself less far-sighted than Adams and the people of Massachusetts. After using all his efforts at conciliation between the King and the colonies, which he found fruitless, he returned to America, arriving in Philadelphia, May 5th, 1775, to find the war had actually begun, the battles of Lexington and Concord having already been fought. In the meantime his faithful wife had passed away.

The breach between England and the American colonies raised a barrier between Franklin and his many friends in England. Under date of July 5th, 1775, Dr. Franklin wrote his famous letter to William Strahan, his friend for many years:

"MR. STRAHAN:

"You are a member of Parliament, and one of that Majority which has doomed my Country to Destruction. You have begun to burn our towns, and murder our People — Look upon your hands! — They are stained with the Blood of your Relations! — You and I were long Friends: — You are now my Enemy,—and I am

Yours,

"B. FRANKLIN."

Having been elected a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, Franklin was instrumental in organizing the army, navy, and finances of the new government. He drew up a

plan of union for the colonies which he presented July 21st, 1775, which is called the "First Sketch of a Plan of Confederation which is known to have been presented to Congress." Not only did he serve in Congress, but was placed in charge of the postal service and was made chairman of the provincial committee of safety to organize Pennsylvania for war. When Samuel Adams proposed his plan for a confederation of the colonies, which did not meet with general approval, that sturdy patriot said: "If none of the rest will join, I will endeavor to unite the New England colonies in confederating." Franklin said to Adams: "I approve your proposal, and if you succeed I will cast in my lot among you." Franklin earnestly supported the proposition for a Declaration of Independence, and affixed his signature to it on July 4th, 1776.

Immediately upon the declaration of independence, Franklin and a committee prepared a number of very masterly addresses to the courts of Europe, informing what the United States had done; assigning their reasons for so doing, and tendering in the most affectionate terms, the friendship and trade of the young nation. In ^{Envoy to} August, Franklin was appointed envoy to the ^{France.} French court, and arriving in Paris he was found to enjoy a reputation, according to John Adams, greater than either Leibnitz, Newton, Frederick, or Voltaire. In order not to embarrass the government, he established himself in the suburb of Passy. He lived plainly but comfortably, although he was accused by John Adams of extravagance. Personally, Franklin was at this time an unique figure: Cochin, the artist, who made the famous "fur-cap portrait" of Franklin a few weeks after his arrival in Paris, writes this to a friend in Europe: "Figure to yourself an old man with gray hair, appearing under a martin fur cap, among the powdered heads of Paris. It is this odd figure that salutes you with handfuls of blessings on you and your little ones." Three days later the French police enter this description on their records: "Dr. Franklin lately arrived in this country. This Quaker wears the full costume of his sect. He has an agreeable physiognomy, spectacles always on his eyes, but little hair; a fur cap is always on his head. He wears no powder; tidy in his dress; very white linen. His only defence is a walking stick."

The Quaker envoy had not been long in France before the attention of all the courts of Europe was attracted to him, by a publication, wherein he demonstrated that, "the young, healthy, and sturdy republic of America, with her simple manners, laborious habits, and millions of fresh land and

produce, would be a much safer borrower of money, than the old, profligate, and debt-burthened government of Britain." The Dutch and French courts, in particular, read his arguments with such attention, that they soon began to make him loans. To the French Cabinet he pointed out, "the inevitable destruction of their fleets, colonies, and commerce, in case of a reunion of Britain and America." In 1782, after the signing of the treaty with France, Franklin resigned, but Congress kept him there until March, 1785, when it voted his return. The three years were spent by Franklin in making commercial treaties with Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Morocco and Prussia. The treaty with Prussia called for the abolishment of privateering. Jefferson succeeded Franklin, and when he was asked "C'est vous, Monsieur, qui remplace le Docteur Franklin?" he replied: "No one can replace him, sir; I am only his successor." Indeed, even his enemies had high respect for Dr. Franklin. The year before his return from France he wrote to his distinguished friend, John Jay:

"I have, as you observe, some enemies in England, but they are my enemies as an American. I have also two or three in America who are my enemies as a minister, but I thank God there are not in the whole world any who are my enemies as a man, for by His grace, through a long life, I have been enabled so to conduct myself that there does not exist a human being who can justly say, 'Benjamin Franklin has wronged me.' This, my friend, is in old age a comfortable reflection."

When Franklin returned to Philadelphia, arriving there September 14th, 1785, he was received with the enthusiasm of his people and was made to feel that his services abroad were duly appreciated. He was now nearly eighty years of age and while he was Return to America. thrice elected president of Pennsylvania and was a delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention, he lived a quiet life, surrounded by his daughter and her family, his friends and his books. He wrote occasionally for the newspapers and in a letter to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, he advocated the transportation of American felons to England, as English felons had been before transported to America. "No due returns," he wrote, "have yet been made for these valuable consignments." In 1786 he wrote to a friend in Boston of the manner in which he passed his declining years. He had been so persistent a worker that he had some compunction about being idle; "but another reflection," he says, "comes to relieve me, whispering, You know that the soul is immortal; why then should you be such a niggard of a little time, when you have a whole eternity before you?" When the Constitutional Convention of May, 1787, was opened, Frank-

lin proposed that the proceedings should begin with prayer. "If a sparrow cannot fall without God's knowledge," he said, "how can an Empire rise without His aid?" This deep conviction which came to him late in life, was further expressed in a letter to Thomas Paine, who was planning his famous *Age of Reason*, Franklin wrote to him: "I would advise you not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person. If men are so wicked with religion, what would they be without it?" At the age of eighty-one he was elected to his last office, being a third time president of Pennsylvania, and at this period he said of himself: "I seem to have intruded myself into the company of posterity, when I ought to have been abed and asleep."

At the age of eighty-two, feeble in body, yet still vigorous in mind, he made his last public speech, before the Federal Constitutional Convention, over which Washington presided; It is a speech showing the charm of modesty in a great man and is noted for its temperance and cheerfulness :

"MR. PRESIDENT:

"I do not entirely approve this constitution at present, but, sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it; for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being His last obliged, by better information, to change opinions public which I once thought right. It is, therefore, that speech. the older that I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects of religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that whenever others differ from them, it is so far error. Steele, a Protestant, tells the pope that the 'only difference between our two churches, in the opinion of the certainty of their doctrines, is, the Romish church is infallible, and the Church of England never in the wrong.'

"But though many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility, as of that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French lady, who, in a little dispute with her sister, said: 'I don't know how it happens, sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right.' In these sentiments, sir, I agree to this constitution, with all its faults, if they are such; because I think a general government necessary for us, and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing, if well administered; and I believe, farther, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted, as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other. I doubt, too, whether any other convention we can obtain, may be able to make a better constitution. For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions,



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their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly, can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will confound our enemies, who are waiting in confidence, to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the builders of Babel and that our states are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting each other's throats. Thus I consent, sir, to this constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that this is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us, in returning to our constituents, were to report the objections he has had to it, and endeavor to gain partisans in support of them, we might prevent its being generally received, and thereby lose all the great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign nations, as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity. Much of the efficiency of any government, in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends on the general opinion of the goodness of that government, as well as the wisdom and integrity of the governors.

"I hope, therefore, that for our own sakes, as a part of the people, and for the sake of our prosperity, we shall act heartily and unanimously, in recommending this constitution, wherever our influence may extend, and turn our future thoughts and endeavors to the means of having it well administered.

"On the whole, sir, I cannot help expressing the wish, that every member of the convention who may still have objections, would, with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and making manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

† One of the final acts in Franklin's long public career was the writing of a Memorial to Congress protesting against slavery, and as late as March 23rd, 1790, he wrote a characteristic answer to a pro-slavery speech in Congress. He died in Philadelphia April 17th, 1790, aged eighty-four years and three months.

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